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Cuba's Military Power Expanding

While the Pollyannas insist that the mass flight of Cuban refugees to the United States shows the moral bankruptcy and economic failure of Fidel Castro's Communist regime, the professionals of the American intelligence community paint an entirely different picture.

Secret assessments presented to Congress by the Defense Intelligence Agency warn that Fidel Castro, far from being at the end of his rope, is at the peak of his military efficiency, thanks to the Soviet Union's military assistance.

The refugee exodus exposes Castro's Cuba as a sham. But his Big Brother in the Kremlin supplies him with the practical support to keep him in control. The 100,000 Cuban refugees may have the principles, but Castro has the firepower.

In fact, humiliating as it seems, the Cubans may have achieved—thanks to their Soviet buddies—a military capability that the United States is still just dreaming about: a rapid deployment force that can be rushed into the breach in brush-fire situations short of an all-out nuclear confrontation.

"The Cuban armed forces have graduated from what was a defensive force to one which, with Soviet assistance, can deploy a large number of troops to distant conflicts on short notice," the DIA briefers secretly informed the House subcommittee on inter-American affairs chaired by Rep. Gus Yatron (D-Pa.).

Obviously, no one is suggesting that Castro can successfully attack the United States—although our intelligence has unearthed information that the Cubans in fact can strike targets in

Florida with their Soviet weapons. The point is that Castro has the military muscle to attack his Latin American neighbors on quick notice.

Thanks to the Soviets, Cuba has "the best-equipped air force in Latin America," according to the Pentagon's intelligence experts. Among the Cuban air force's recently acquired planes is the MIG23 "Flogger," which, fully loaded, "can reach portions of the Southeastern United States, Mexico, Central America and the western islands of the Caribbean," according to the secret transcript.

In addition, Soviet-supplied AN26 transports have "the capability to air drop troops in portions of Florida . . . all of Jamaica, Haiti and the Bahamas, and most of the Dominican Republic," the DIA analysts warn.

But as anyone who has ever done business with the Soviets knows, the Russian bear hug is not a purely affectionate embrace. It requires a certain quid pro quo.

"The Soviets and the Cubans have consummated what you might call an effective marriage," states a Pentagon report obtained by my reporter Lucette Lagnado, "where the Cubans are providing the troops and the Soviets virtually all the equipment."

As a result, the intelligence analysts have concluded, "the Cubans are now able to serve as an important regional military actor in the Caribbean area."